

CHAPTER X

FROM the roof of the Fort one has a fine view of the surrounding 361
 desert. Due south-west the muddy creek curves like a snake past
 the little town of Khan, a dependency of Sharjah. Only the tops
 of the houses and the slender minaret are visible, since Khan is
 hidden by sand-dunes and an enchanting copse of date palms.
 The palm trees thicken as one looks further south, marking the
 beginning of the flourishing plantations which screen the town of
 Dubai, ten miles distant. Khan consists of about a hundred houses,
 and is ruled by a headman; the inhabitants are fishermen, pearl 396
 divers and sponge collectors. There is a very small boat-building 322
 industry, whilst some charming brass-bound chests are made there 228
 by native craftsmen; these chests are made of teak wood and are
 usually lacquered, after the Kuwait fashion. The sponge industry
 is unimportant and is confined to a few families. Men and women
 wade into the creek at low tide to collect the sponges, which are
 coarse and of an extremely poor grade. They cannot be exported
 and are used by the local Arabs.

Sharjah, a large rambling town of about 10,000 inhabitants, 361
 lies one mile north-west of the Fort, from which one has a fine view 712
 of the half-ruined fort, from one of the towers of which flies the
 sheikh's personal flag—a scarlet square with a wide white border.
 This fort, or 'palace', which lies at the back of the town, was built
 for strategic reasons with its gateway facing the open desert. The
 Khan Bahadur told me that it is about four hundred years old; the
 towers and the gateway were erected by the Portuguese, who
 established military and trading outposts on the Persian Gulf coast
 in the seventeenth century. Old ships' cannons, taken from the
 wrecks of British and French merchantmen, ornament the front of
 the fort; some bear the Admiralty anchor or the Royal insignia,
 G.R. III, and though rusty and time-worn, are still fired by the
 sheikh during tribal wars or on festive occasions.

The Persian Gulf was the haunt of pirates until almost the end 000
 of the nineteenth century, and the waters around Sharjah and
 Dubai were infested with these cruel and bloodthirsty sea-brigands,

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721 Incidents like the above continued unabated throughout the century. In 1820 a general Treaty of Peace was signed, which included the submission of Sultan-bin-Saqr, Sheikh of Sharjah (who, on leaving the hospitality afforded him by the Sultan of Muscat, apparently took to piracy as a quick means of recovering his lost fortunes), and the Sheikhs of Dubai, Ras-al-Khaimah, Bahrain, and Abu Dhabi. Piracy abated somewhat in the next ten years, but in 1850 we hear of further attacks on British merchant ships, and depredations on shipping continued, in spite of severe reprisals and fines, until the end of the century.

It was the appearance of the steamship, with its greater speed, independence of winds, and heavier gun power, which really brought piracy to a close. The Arabs realized that it was suicide to attempt to pit their wooden ships and boats against modern sea power, and the few who stuck to piracy confined their attacks to smaller, unarmed sailing ships.

The establishment of order at sea was necessarily a gradual process, but by 1890 piracy had ceased to be a popular profession. There were sporadic outbreaks in the last few years of the century, and as late as 1905 a British merchant vessel was attacked. But the Wahabi influence had long been broken, the fight against iron-clad men-o'-war was unequal, and the old piratical tribes settled down once more to the safer occupation of fishing and pearl-diving.

Piracy is dead in the Persian Gulf, although isolated attacks on dhows still occur. As recently as 1944 a large Arab dhow, containing food supplies on its way to Dubai, was attacked by a native sailing ship and the crew murdered. The matter was immediately reported to the Political Officer, Captain Bird, who ascertained that the pirates came from a village on the Persian side of the Gulf, near Jask. Representations were made to the Iran Government, and it is believed that the culprits were apprehended and hanged, suitable compensation being paid to the dependents of the victims. To-day piracy is frowned upon by all sections of the community; even the sheikhs consider it is no longer respectable.

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501 Fishing and pearling have replaced the more violent forms of sea traffic, and shipbuilding remains an important industry on the Trucial Coast. The war has held up supplies of timber and sail-cloth, which came from India, but several large boats have been built from stocks of old material. The largest dhows, which sometimes sail as far south as South Africa and can easily make the passage

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to India, are about two hundred feet long and of several hundred tons. They have a high poop deck and a lofty covered gallery at the stern, which give them the appearance of galleons; in fact, they are said to owe their design to the Portuguese vessels which sailed these waters in the seventeenth century. 396
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The timbers are caulked with glue and lime and the highly polished hulk is preserved with shark's oil. Oars are used to manoeuvre the vessels when in shallow water, and these sometimes attain a length of nearly thirty feet and require half a dozen men to handle them. To witness the pearling fleet as it sets out at sunset for the pearling beds, at the beginning of the season, is an experience long remembered; the sky is radiant with purple and gold, and the silhouettes of the sails, like bats' wings, dance on the sparkling sea. It is a picture suggestive of peace, but to the foreigner of a hundred years ago those sails must have been symbols of menace. 228
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443 dates, ground nuts, spices and ghee butter. One shop was devoted
 [276] entirely to hubble-bubble pipes and we watched an old Arab
 carving a pipe stem. The stems, which are of bamboo, are fitted
 with a brass ring near the top to form a lip for the smoker, the body
 of the stem being delicately covered with gold and silver thread.
 The second stem, through which the air escapes, is of plain bamboo,
 engraved with Arabic designs which are carved with a red-hot
 knife, and then coloured with indigo. The bowl, made of unglazed
 pottery, has a slender neck flared at the top. These pipes cost
 about ten rupees each, the stems being a rupee extra.

Some of the shops are well stocked with canned goods and
 haberdashery from the Indian market, and one saw shelves full
 of sewing cotton, buttons, metal polish, brass lamps, and cheap
 cloth. A common sight is raw cotton, still in its pods, which is
 gathered from trees in the interior; untreated hemp and tobacco
 leaves, crudely dried. There were few carpets, and those we saw
 441 were of indifferent quality. A few of the merchants appeared to be
 well-off and one or two had robes of coloured silk, edged with
 gold thread. They had noble, intelligent faces, and one patriarch,
 with a snow-white beard and spotless linen *abbas*, looked out of
 place in that ill-assorted crowd. A large sapphire ring sparkled
 on his finger and his long, thin hands were those of an artist. One
 181 must be careful not to judge the Arab by Western standards, since
 dirt and insanitation are not abhorrent to them as they are to us.
 Even a cultured and fastidious Arab may have manners which
 would be out of place in a London drawing-room.

562 Apart from little girls up to ten years of age, we saw very few
 women, and they were heavily veiled. We walked to the little
 • 396 quay, which was clustered with dhows and rowing boats and
 501 watched the intense activity of shipbuilding and repairing that was
 in progress. The seams of the hulls are caulked with raw cotton
 and then covered with pitch, and the bottoms are painted with
 lime mixed with shark's oil, a good preservative. The upper
 part of the hull, above the water line, is also varnished with fish
 oil. Some of the sails are enormous and stretch from bows to
 stern, giving the dhows great speed on the water. This is
 necessary since they have to cover great distances, especially in the
 pearling season, when they may have to sail seventy miles in a
 single day to reach the beds.

501 There was quite a chilly breeze as we entered a ferryboat and
 were rowed across the creek, although the sun was still high above

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ladies' lingerie, but he has little use for some of the strange products of the West. For the townsman, who is living in a mixed community of Arabs from many parts of the Persian Gulf, Persians and Indians, it is a different proposition, and his materialism has made Dibai a small British export area, though mostly for the less refined goods that are unable to find buyers on a more discriminating market.

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The primitive bedouins who live by the foothills of the main mountain range, who owe allegiance to no one, are a constant cause of worry to the sheikhs, from whom they extract levies in return for protection; if the money is not forthcoming they raid the villages and carry off goods, camels and children. On the whole, however, the people of the coast seem to have a peaceful enough existence, making their living by, among other things, pearling, fishing and boat-building.

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At several points along the coast the wells are some distance inland, and water has to be transported to the villages by camel or donkey. Though brackish and unpalatable, it is expensive; the cost of buying water is a burden on the poor, and they take only sufficient for their minimum needs. Even so, the water-pot is always at hand when a traveller passes by — a simple hospitality that is often very touching. The lot of the dogs, a wretched one at the best of times in the

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